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News From Bloomberg

EPA's Water Tests in Wyoming Town Flawed, Oil Group Says

By Mark Drajem on October 18, 2012

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-10-18/epa-s-water-tests-in-wyoming-town-flawed-oil-group-says>

Testing methods used by the Environmental Protection Agency in a Wyoming town where residents blame hydraulic fracturing for water contamination are flawed, and an updated analysis doesn't show drilling tainted the aquifer, an industry group said.

The American Petroleum Institute in Washington, which represents companies such as Exxon Mobil Corp. (XOM) and Halliburton Co., (HAL) said its analysis of water-testing data pulled by the U.S. Geological Survey from an EPA-drilled test well didn't find evidence of chemicals that the EPA had found a year ago. The group did find examples of shoddy scientific practices.

"Soup to nuts we are seeing poor to sloppy work," Erik Milito, the group's director of upstream operations, said today on a conference call. "EPA's water quality investigation at Pavillion, Wyoming, adds to our concerns about similar testing it is conducting in its national study."

A Geological Survey report released Sept. 26 on water testing on one monitoring well near the rural Wyoming town identified levels of methane, ethane, diesel compounds and phenol, which the EPA had identified in its report last year.

The EPA cited the presence of those compounds to tie fracking near Pavillion to water contamination in a draft report in December. Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, uses millions of gallons of chemically treated water and sand to free oil and natural gas trapped in rock. The technology helped the U.S. cut dependence on imported fuels and lower power bills.

Endangered Water

Critics have said fracking endangers water supplies, while the industry maintains that no confirmed case of such contamination has ever been demonstrated scientifically. If the Pavillion results hold up to further scrutiny, they could refute that contention.

The driller, Encana Corp. (ECA), said it's not responsible for the pollutants in the water. Separate data

from the EPA's retest of water in the area was released on Oct. 11, and wasn't discussed by today's industry report.

The EPA's December report was the first U.S. government finding to link fracking and water contamination. The EPA and USGS re-test results are "generally consistent" with the EPA findings from last year, David Bloomgren, an agency spokesman, said in an e-mail today.

The API's analysis of the USGS data found that the chemicals the EPA found in its testing wells could have been caused by the paint in the steel pipe used to line the well.

Inconsistent Results

"Most of the key indicator compounds that the EPA claims show a possible link between hydraulic fracturing and supposed groundwater contamination were not found in the USGS samples," the API report said. "Thus, the USGS results are inconsistent with EPA's results of 2011."

The industry group said key chemical compounds, glycols and 2-butoxyethanol, weren't found by the USGS.

Diesel-range organic compounds, uranium, radium, methane, ethane and arsenic, all were found in that water, according to an analysis by a hydrology expert working with local farmers.

"It looks like the data is comparable between the USGS and EPA," Wilma Subra, who has her own testing company and works with residents in Pavillion, said Oct. 11, when the EPA released its own follow-up findings. "This result confirms what was found before" that linked gas-drilling with contaminated water, she said.

Encana, based in Calgary, owns 140 natural-gas wells in an area of cattle and hay farms outside of Pavillion, about 230 miles (370 kilometers) northeast of Salt Lake City. The company argues that contaminants found in domestic water wells are naturally occurring, and the two test wells that the EPA drilled in 2010 were improperly constructed.

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